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SUBJECT: LOWER PROFILE FOR KREMLIN YOUTH GROUP

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Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Recent Kremlin steps to rein in the United Russia-affiliated youth movement Nashi suggest that GOR neuralgia about a possible Orange Revolution has faded. With the Kremlin now confident that operation successor has been successfully launched and will encounter no opposition, Nashi has been told to re-invent itself as a provider of charitable and community-based services related to the Medvedev-led National Priority Projects and end its harassment of alleged "enemies" of the regime. Commentators believe that the Kremlin had tired of Nashi's heavy-handed tactics and confrontational style, and hope that Nashi in its new incarnation will present a better face to the West and to Russia's own citizens. End summary.

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Rumors of Nashi's Demise...  
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¶2. (SBU) The Kremlin-friendly youth group Nashi was created in 2005 in order to counter the perceived threat of an Orange Revolution in Russia. Since its creation, the organization has been used to promote Kremlin policies and discredit anti-Kremlin figures. The movement has been reflexively hostile towards the West and other of Russia's perceived enemies, ostensibly in response to the "mood" of the Russian people. In response to Estonia's decision to re-locate a Soviet World War II memorial from Tallinn's central square to a cemetery, Nashi members picketed the Estonian Embassy in Moscow and hounded the Estonian Ambassador. In the wake of his appearance at the anti-government Other Russia conference in summer 2006, Nashi activists relentlessly harassed the British ambassador: they picketed the British Embassy, and dogged the Ambassador's at his public appearances in Moscow and the regions. Formal efforts by the British Embassy via the MFA to force Nashi to halt its disruptive behavior bore no fruit for months.

¶3. (SBU) In the run-up to the 2007 Duma election campaign, Nashi activists heckled former Premier and erstwhile presidential candidate Kasyanov and took part in activities to intimidate opposition movements, including harassment of several of the Dissenters Marches. In the wake of the December 2 elections, Nashi members appointed themselves, with no interference from the police, to "protect" the Central Election Commission from potential incursions. According to news reports, Nashi youth were on combat duty the day following the elections, ready to defend against "enemies of Russia" and to short-circuit any effort to stage an Orange Revolution.

¶4. (U) On January 29, the media reported that Nashi would re-invent itself as a less centralized youth movement, and noted that only five of the movement's fifty regional offices

would remain open. The movement's top cadres have moved from work in the youth movement to jobs in the government, legislature, and Public Chamber. Vasiliy Yakemenko, the 37 year old former leader of Nashi, has been appointed to head the Committee on Youth Affairs, a Federal organization created to coordinate national youth policy and programs. Five leaders from Nashi and other youth movements won seats in the December 2 Duma elections, while others were elected to seats in local legislative assemblies or in the regional public chambers. Rumors have circulated that many others in Nashi were disappointed and disillusioned that they had not received jobs allegedly promised them during the Duma campaign.

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...Have Been Greatly Exaggerated  
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15. (U) At a February 1 press conference, Nashi Head Nikita Borovikov said, "the subsiding of the threat of an "Orange Revolution" (presumably because of the apparently seamless transition from Putin to Medvedev) meant that Nashi could now "concentrate on other things." He suggested that his organization would maintain the ability to attract at least 100,000 demonstrators to rallies, protests, or other mass activities should a specific threat arise. According to Borovikov, Nashi planned to focus on twelve core projects that would provide a variety of political outlets for young people. They include efforts to improve the image of service in the armed forces, instruction in Russian Orthodoxy, and even a new line of fashionable yet patriotic clothing. These new projects appeared to emerge from the activities that Nashi activists took part in at their most recent summer camp (reftel). Borovikov indicated that each project was begun late in 2007, although the exact number of participants in each project were not given. When asked, he did not or could not identify funding sources for the projects.

16. (SBU) Despite discussions about a new role for Nashi, the organization has continued to behave assertively. In January, Nashi members picketed the European Commission in Moscow to protest the inclusion of several Nashi members on an EU visa blacklist. Those blacklisted had participated in sometimes violent protests against the re-location of a Soviet War Memorial from central Tallinn, and when Estonia entered the Schengen zone on January 1, Tallinn ensured that the activists would be prevented from traveling to other Schengen countries. In response, on January 29 Nashi leaders submitted to the Russian Foreign Ministry a list of Estonian citizens whom they feel ought to be barred from entering Russia.

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The Kremlin's Unruly Child  
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17. (C) According to Aleksey Mukhin, General Director of the Center for Political Information, presidential heir apparent Medvedev has little interest in maintaining a youth group whose aim would be solely to prevent an Orange Revolution. With Medvedev's popularity soaring and real opponents like ex-Prime Minister Kasyanov out of the race, there is little prospect of an Orange Revolution in Russia. Mukhin thought that youth parading through Moscow in defense of the current establishment had increased the unease of Western media and governments with Russian politics. In particular, the image of Nashi youth hounding the Estonian and British ambassadors had created a negative image in Europe and seemed to have embarrassed the Kremlin. According to Mukhin, the order to reorganize Nashi came directly from the Kremlin and was part of an effort to support Medvedev's attempt to present a more Western-leaning image of Russia as the succession race got underway.

18. (C) Nashi's new-found restraint, according to Mukhin, would be another signal that Russia's political culture had entered a new, less confrontational phase. Mukhin noted that the change had been in the works for some time and had culminated with the Kremlin decision to put Borovikov in

charge of the "liquidation" of Nashi, and the absorption of much of the organization's leadership into government committees or the Duma.

¶9. (C) Still, as the Moscow Carnegie Center's Liliya Shevtsova told us, five of Nashi's regional offices will remain open, "in order to keep Nashi within bus range" of any undesirable developments. Shevtsova agreed that, with concerns about an Orange Revolution on the wane, many in the Kremlin had tired of Nashi's "tacky" escapades, and that the Medvedev team, in particular wanted to keep Nashi's street politics at arm's length.

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Comment  
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¶10. (C) All signs are that, Mukhin's comments notwithstanding, the decision to re-channel Nashi had been made relatively recently. As early as the summer of 2007, the organization seemed to be in full flower. Its camp at Selinger was well-attended, and the organization's activities there were only selectively accessible to a very curious press. With the beginning of the fall Duma election campaign, Nashi remained poised to be a thorn in the side of those identified as "foreign and domestic enemies." The decision to pull the plug on the kinds of activities that Nashi has been most closely identified with to date suggests that Medvedev's team is attempting at least to put a new face on its treatment of those out of step with the Kremlin.  
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